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151344Z Jun 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 000857

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/12/2015

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SUBJECT: BAHRAIN'S BUSINESS CHAMBER LAUNCHES LOBBYING
EFFORTS

REF: MANAMA 584

Classified By: A/DCM Hallie Hahn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) The Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) is moving ahead with its plan to form a political lobby in the Kingdom. BCCI members are holding a series of meetings with members of parliament to strengthen ties and advocate an agenda that supports economic reforms. The press reported June 12 that the BCCI has created a workplan to ensure that candidates with "sound" economic policies are successful in the 2006 parliamentary elections. MP Jehad BuKamal, chair of the Council of Representatives' (COR) Finance and Economy Committee, stated publicly that BCCI involvement in the political process is welcome, though he noted that BCCI (or any other organization's) direct funding of candidates is unconstitutional.

2. (C) The BCCI's first meeting was with the COR's Independent (pro-government) bloc led by MP Ahmed Behzad. Behzad told PolOff that the discussion focused on the Crown Prince's labor reform draft law, which is currently before parliament. The BCCI feels that the law, which requires companies to pay fees for expatriate workers, places too much of a burden on the private sector. Behzad said his bloc and the BCCI agreed to meet regularly to discuss economic issues.

3. (C) Comment: The BCCI has reminded EmbOffs every chance it gets of its opposition to the Crown Prince's proposed labor reform program, most recently during a meeting with the board of the newly accredited AmCham. The BCCI has had to scale back its original plan to directly finance the campaigns of business-friendly candidates, and now seeks to play the role of a lobby that can also serve as a platform for the views of candidates with whom it agrees (reftel). The BCCI's move onto the political stage represents another step in the maturation of Bahrain's young democracy.

MONROE